

Artist Lori Gordon wants to go home. But since hurricane Katrina upended her life, all that remains of the house she cherished for twelve years is a battered slab of concrete and the tile kitchen floor.

Gordon returns to the property most days, salvaging what little she can find of her belongings. She's developed what she refers to as an extraordinary attachment to the colorful tile floor she created and put down herself years before. Each morning, she sweeps the floor with meticulous care, cleaning the last vestige of her home.

"I went out a few days ago," she says. "The insurance adjuster had finally come by and left me a note. He did it with black spray paint on that beautiful clean tile floor."



artist Lori Gordon surveys the remains of her Clermont Harbor house

She picks her way through the barricade of splintered trees and debris that surrounds the concrete square where her house used to stand. Gordon points into what used to be her backyard, now an impassable barrier of destruction. "Most of my house is about two blocks that way," she says.

Gordon spots an ornate piece of cast-iron camouflaged by a broken pine. She explains that each day, she finds new treasures in the mud and she wrestles with what turns out to be the base of her antique sewing machine. Finally, she holds the trestle of iron aloft. The name of the sewing machine company has been worked into the pattern of the metal. It reads, "New Home."

"Maybe this is an omen," she says and smiles.

Gordon's current home is a small travel trailer she purchased the week after the storm. She parked it on a friend's property north of the coastline, assuming she'd be safe on higher ground. The morning of this interview (Friday, September 23rd), she woke to moonlight reflecting on the water that had risen in the night from hurricane Rita. She waded out to safety, abandoning her trailer, car and her van to the rising surge. For the second time in less than a month, she's had to leave behind all the possessions in her life.

Gordon smiles as she makes a joke about becoming a "double evacuee," but the tears are crowding her eyes.

"I found myself trapped on an island," she says. "All I could think is, I want to go home."

Lori Gordon is one of the most popular artists in the small town of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The quaint village had established a reputation as an arts colony on the scenic and relatively undeveloped coast of Hancock County. The county has a new reputation now. The media calls it "Ground Zero" because it bore the full brunt of Hurricane Katrina's force.

Ironically, the title of Gordon's last art show earlier in the year was titled "End of the Road." The collection of paintings and collages depicted the natural beauty of her neighborhood of Clermont Harbor, located at the end of a narrow beach road. Pristine wetlands and marshes surrounded the small community. That serene setting had lured her from her native South Dakota over a decade before.



"Barrier Island" painting by Lori Gordon

Before the hurricane, Gordon had been concerned about losing her quiet quality of life to condominium developers. She co-founded an activist group, Coastal Community Watch, which was fighting plans to cover the marshes with high-rises. No one foresaw a direct hit by the hurricane that would turn out to be the worst storm in the history of the country.

Not one wall remains standing in Gordon's beloved Clermont Harbor neighborhood. While the 150 mph winds caused much of the damage, most came from the tsunami-like wall of water that charged inland, acting like a gigantic bulldozer. Experts estimate the tidal surge on the Hancock coast was between 35 and 42 feet. Weather reports before the storm had predicted a top surge of 22 feet.

Gordon monitored the weather closely when the storm entered the Gulf and believed initial predictions of a strike in the eastern panhandle of Florida. On the day before the storm, it became apparent that Katrina had chosen a new target. Gordon frantically banged on the door of her 27 year old daughter, who had recently relocated to the neighborhood.

"I told her to take the baby and run," Gordon says. "It's probably the only time in her life that girl has ever listened to me."

Her daughter and son-in-law fled to Georgia with Gordon's 21/2 year old grandchild, while Gordon and her husband boarded up their house and studio, then packed a few belongings. They drove to a friend's house in the north part of the county with Gordon's computer, some important papers and several favorite pieces of art.

Her friend's house was one of the few lucky ones – it sustained little damage. The small group of evacuees huddled around a weather radio, but even after the storm, no one mentioned Hancock County in any of the reports. They didn't realize until much later that the lack of communication was caused by the overwhelming destruction.

Gordon winces as she recalls the 2nd day after the storm. She and her husband were able to make it back to the coast, but couldn't drive close to Clermont Harbor because of impassable roads. Gordon explains that they didn't have to see their house to know its fate.

"The Old Town of Bay St. Louis itself is on a high ridge," she says. "It didn't even flood when Camille hit with 25 feet of water. But when I saw how much of Old Town had been literally wiped out, I realized my place was a goner."

The gallery in Bay St. Louis where Gordon showed her work was destroyed as well, leaving her with no place to sell her work. But Gordon's not wasting time on self-pity. As she combs the woods each day, retrieving the scant remains of her

belongings, she returns with materials for new collage projects. The "New Home" sewing machine piece will serve as the base for a wall sculpture.

Gordon's husband, a furniture maker, is now working in Minnesota. Her daughter's family has settled in Wilmington, N.C. Yet, Gordon is reluctant to leave the area permanently. She's hoping to create a mobile art studio from her well-worn van and travel the South giving collage workshops. In the year prior to Katrina, Gordon's workshops had developed a solid regional following.

"I absolutely want to use this area as a base," she declares. "Am I afraid of something like this happening again? Of course, but bad things happen everywhere. In all my travels, I've never even seen the sense of community that I've found here on the Coast. I'm just like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. There's no place like home, there's no place like home."

To make a contribution directly to help artists like Lori Gordon rebuild their lives and careers, contact Gwen Impson at impson@msn.com. Impson is president of The Arts, Hancock County Mississippi, a non-profit organization which has set up an emergency fund for local artists.

To see Gordon's work and for information on her collage d'art workshops, visit her website at www.lorikgordon.blogspot.com.

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